

Trends in International Politics 2024

Navigating Extremism: Safeguarding Europe's Religious Sites amidst Shifting Political Landscapes

Trend Report 10 / January 2024

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Impressum:

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The terrorist attacks on the 7th of October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli counter-offensive have led to conflicts in Europe. Religious communities, including Jewish and Muslim communities, have been targeted and subjected to violent attacks on their property and lives. Hate crimes are increasing, and discriminatory remarks against Jews and Muslims are becoming more prevalent. This worrying development is now being reflected at EU level, where the home affairs chief has expressed concern over the increased risk of a terrorist attack as a result of the

Israel-Hamas war during the Christmas period. The chief has pledged €30 million to support member states in protecting Places of Worship (PoW) (Jones, 2023). The mood was correctly interpreted at EU

level. Following a tip-off about a terrorist attack on Cologne Cathedral in Germany at Christmas, the cathedral remained closed to tourists. The suspect is still in custody due to a European arrest warrant from Austria. At the same time, Vienna also received a tip-off about a possible attack on a church at Christmas (Tagesschau, 2024).

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But why do religious sites fall victim to acts of (extremist) violence? Religious sites and Places of Worship, along with other locations where people gather, are often targeted by terrorists as they offer the potential to cause a high number of casualties and instil fear while also gaining media coverage (UNOCT, 2022). Places of Worship also allow attackers to strike at the heart of a community, and they may even increase the lethality of their attack by targeting a religious holiday of the community. Attacks targeting PoW and their congregations

can range from active-shooter incidents to suicide attacks, IEDs, arson, cyberattacks, or vandalism. The special features of Places of Worship are also the reasons why they are particularly vulnerable

soft targets. Religious groups may be more susceptible to attacks due to their open-door policies. PoW architecture often involves old buildings, such as churches, which are particularly vulnerable to fire. In this context, finding a balance between security measures and the free practice of religion is a challenge.

The EU-funded [PARTES](#) project aims to analyse the risks to Places of Worship and develop sustainable protection models. The analysis of threat levels among various religious groups in different European countries within the project revealed significant differences in the countries. In addition, attributing attacks on PoW to a specific group with a particular ideology has proven challenging, as such actions are often spontaneous. However, with the increasing acceptance of xenophobic or racist actions in society, opportunities for such behaviour and those who engage in it also increase.

In Austria, the impact of the conflict between Israel and Hamas was immediately apparent. Demonstrations in support of both sides took place from the

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outset. Within two weeks of the conflict's start, the terror threat level in Austria was raised to the second-highest due to an increase in attacks and the fear of future ones (The Local Austria, 2023).

The PARTES project findings reveal evidence of the impact in Austria. Within the first 10 days of the war, a total of 76 antisemitic incidents were reported, representing a 300% increase compared

to the average number of incidents during this period. In addition, national organisations collecting data have reported an increase in anti-Muslim racism and hate speech since October 2023 (SCENOR, 2023). As already mentioned, Christian Places of Worship should also be considered as potential targets, as the threats against Cologne Cathedral or St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna show (Marchart, 2023). However, the average number of anti-Christian incidents reported during the same period has not significantly deviated from previous years (SCENOR, 2023).

Overall, several attacks were recorded between October and December, including one successful attack against a church and three significant antisemitic hate crimes against PoW.

Furthermore, authorities prevented an attack against an unspecified synagogue in mid-December by arresting a 16-year-old Da'esh supporter who was plotting an attack. During an online chat, the individual stated their intention to purchase a weapon and claimed to have the necessary financial resources. The hard drives found in their possession contained numerous Da'esh propaganda

files, including instructions for building bombs and carrying out attacks (SCENOR, 2023).

In addition, three events identified as significant hate crimes targeted the Jewish community. These cases involved acts of vandalism and arson on buildings related to the Jewish community, resulting in minor to moderate damage. In two cases, the perpetrators remain unknown. The third case was carried out by three intoxicated individuals without any affiliation to extremist groups (SCENOR, 2023).

The rise in hate crimes and other forms of violence against religious groups, particularly Jewish and Muslim communities, is a concerning issue not only in Austria but also in other countries. In addition to various forms of physical violence, there has been a significant increase in online antisemitism and Islamophobia reported across various platforms and social media (Renard & Cook, 2023).

This trend is likely to continue as long as the conflict lasts and, given the expected geopolitical developments, probably beyond its end. This can be attributed to the elections taking place in 2024 in which political parties, particularly those on the right, who use anti-minority

rhetoric and encourage acceptance of such positions are gaining momentum.

In the European context, an increase in right-wing parties can be observed, which have been able to win elections with rhetoric directed against minorities. For instance, in the 2023 elections in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV) emerged victorious by taking a clear stance against Islam and making promises such as the rejection of all new asylum claims (Kassam, 2023). In December 2023, an Alternative for Germany (AfD) candidate became the mayor of a German city with 40,000 inhabitants, following the party's success in the Hesse and Bavaria elections earlier that year. The AfD in Saxony views this as a positive indication for the upcoming elections in Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg in 2024 (Maksan, 2023). Austria is set to face a significant election year in 2024, with both EU and National Council elections taking place. According to recent surveys, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) is currently leading the polls with around 30%. It is important to note that these forecasts may change in the lead up to the elections, but the fundamental political opinions of the parties are unlikely to shift significantly. In the current polls for the EU parliamentary election, two right-

wing/far-right groups are competing to become the third largest group in parliament, with nearly one hundred members. These groups are the European Conservatives and Reformists, which includes Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, and the Identity and Democracy group, which includes the FPÖ and the AfD, among others (Camut, 2023).

As the rise of right-wing parties and their electoral victories underscore a growing acceptance of their ideologies, the implications extend beyond political spheres, influencing societal attitudes. This trend is particularly evident during times of global uncertainty, as reflected

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in election results and, unfortunately, in incidents of violence against minorities.

Addressing this issue requires conducting more scientific research and improving the quality of crime recording across Europe to establish a basis for comparison. To counter discriminatory aspects of public debate, it is vital to effectively implement interfaith dialogue and education initiatives aimed at raising awareness of antisemitism and Islamophobia. However, these processes rely on correct execution and can often fail due to uncertainties surrounding responsibility and funding.

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